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Commemoration and Controversy *Without Warning*

Edwin C. Bearss

For more than a year, the staff of the Smithsonian Institution's most popular public facility—the National Air and Space Museum—has struggled with its exhibit, *The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II*, scheduled to open in April 1995. Even before the first review copies of the exhibit plan and label copy were ready for review by a panel of historians of divergent interests, ages, and backgrounds, the exhibit was being criticized by veterans, principally those who served in the Army Air Force in World War II.

Having worked closely with Tom Crouch, one of the Air and Space Museum curators involved in *The Last Act*, as the National Park Service's subject matter expert for Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park, I had apprised him of the Service's difficulties in interpreting World War II sites associated with the Great Pacific War, and of the successful steps taken by the Washington Office to address the situation in regard to the preparation of the USS Arizona Memorial's new film. I was accordingly included as a member of the Air and Space's panel that convened February 7, 1994, to review and comment on the exhibit working draft.

I was one of two World War II veterans on the panel and the only one who, as a Marine, had seen combat against the Japanese. In the discussions, which focused on overview rather than detail, I was surprised at the naiveté of several of the academics on the panel. They were unaware of the magnitude of the Bataan Death March; they did not appreciate the fact that from the surrender of the Philippines until the final days, the fight against the Japanese "was to the knife and the knife was to the hilt"; they did not know that corpsmen and medics did not wear the Geneva Cross bussard because if they did they were prime targets for Japanese jungle

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Commemoration and Controversy

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fighters, etc. One of the panel's revisionist historians expressed in no uncertain terms his antipathy for Col. Paul Tibbetts, commander of the *Enola Gay,* because in an interview the colonel had shown no remorse for dropping the Hiroshima bomb.

In the months since the meeting of the panel, the exhibit plan has come under mounting attack from veterans, veterans organizations, and the Congress. The plan is in its fourth or fifth revision. Now that it has met many of the concerns of the veterans and their constituents, the plan is coming under attack from the left, even as the fuselage section of *Enola Gay* is being positioned in the exhibit hall.

Because of their traumatic character, how to commemorate and interpret our nation's major wars onsite has always been a challenge. In view of the Smithsonian's difficulties with the *Enola Gay,* how the challenge has been met at Civil War and World War II sites administered by the National Park Service—and the emotional problems encountered—is of more than passing interest.

A generation after Gens. Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee met in Wilmer McLean's parlor at Appomattox Court House, the United States government became involved in battlefield preservation and interpretation. This was 26 years after the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association (GBMA) was chartered in 1864 to commemorate "the great deeds of valor… and the signal events which renders these battlegrounds illustrious." The GBMA's focus was to acquire lands where the Army of the Potomac fought and to honor with memorials Union troops, their leaders, and their states. Then, in August 1890, President Benjamin Harrison signed an Act establishing Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park. Three commissioners—two Union and one Confederate veteran of the battle, responsible to the Secretary of War—were charged with developing the park and identifying and marking the lines of battle of all the troops, both Confederate and Union, engaged. States were authorized to place markers and memorials on sites where their soldiers camped, fought, suffered, and died.

Wirz memorial. Photo courtesy Andersonville NHS, Andersonville, GA.

During the next nine years, three more national military parks and one national battlefield site were established. Among these was Gettysburg, which, under its commission, initiated measures to acquire lands, identify and mark the troop positions of both armies, and to encourage Southern states and organizations to erect memorials to honor Confederate leaders and soldiers.

Continuing our series on the 50th anniversary commemoration of World War II events, and problems associated with the management and interpretation of war resources, this issue of *CRM* contains two articles on commemorating wars. In the first article, Ed Bearss discusses how the National Park Service is meeting the challenge of interpreting our nation's major wars at Civil War and World War II sites. The second article, by Franza and Johnson, illustrates how European nations have memorialized the 20th century wars.

Veterans, in the years following the Civil War, and, increasingly since the mid-1880s, had reconciled many of their differences. Many looked back on the war as the climactic event in their lives. They were cognizant of a common race, language, and nationality. The commissions, in their interpretation, focused on battles and campaigns, common sacrifices and heroism, and not on burning social and political issues. Even so, old antagonisms surfaced. Members of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) were angered when they learned of plans by the Georgia Division of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) to erect in the village of Andersonville a memorial to Henry Wirz, the commandant of the Andersonville inner stockade. Wirz had been tried before a military court and executed in November 1865 as a war criminal. Despite efforts by leaders of the GAR and the United Confederate Veterans (UCV) to calm passions, it boiled over at the GAR's 1906 Annual National Encampment, held in Minneapolis, when the old soldiers in blue passed a resolution condemning the proposal. The resulting rancor failed to deter the UDC and the Wirz memorial was erected and dedicated in 1909.

Some three decades before, in 1866-69, Union veterans had vainly sought federal funding to purchase the lands on which the Andersonville stockade and its dependencies were erected as a memorial to the heroism and sacrifice of the men imprisoned there and a monument to the infamy of the Rebels. The proposal was dropped because the United States government was unready to expend public funds for preservation of the stockade or acquisition of land on which it was located without a congressional appropriation.

While battlefield commissions and leaders of veterans organizations promoted national unity and reconciliation in the 1890s and 1900s, they encountered difficulty in securing monies from legislatures in states that had cast their lot with the Confederacy. Because of his prestige, John Brown Gordon carried the day in Georgia, and his native state in 1896 became the first Southern state to make an appropriation for a state memorial at a national

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military park. In Mississippi, it took a full court press by the commission, National Commander of the UCV Stephen D. Lee, Granville Dodge, Governor James Kimble Vardaman, and others to lobby from the legislature an appropriation for a Mississippi state memorial at Vicksburg National Military Park. It would be June 1917 before Virginia erected and dedicated a state memorial at Gettysburg National Military Park.

In 1933 the National Park Service (NPS) assumed from the War Department responsibility for administration of the battlefield parks. Although Andersonville National Cemetery and the memorial area were administered by the War Department they were not transferred at this time.

The NPS quickly gave increased emphasis to interpretation and educational programs at the Civil War sites for which it was newly responsible. Visitor centers housing museum exhibits and collections commanded attention in the 1930s with Emergency Conservation Administration funding and, in Mission 66 (1956-66), wayside exhibits supplemented and enhanced information found on the War Department's iron tablets. The content continued relatively non-controversial. Until the early 1960s the terrible fratricidal conflict was called the War Between the States, in deference to Southerner sensitivities and the pro-Confederate leanings of many in NPS senior management. It was the mid-1970s before the role of African Americans and other minorities was more than alluded to at the Civil War battlefield parks; Indians were depicted as the foe in Indian War areas; and controversial issues like slavery as a cause of the Civil War were essentially papered over.

Andersonville National Historic Site was transferred from the Department of the Army and added to the system in 1970. Transfer of Andersonville National Cemetery and memorial area was opposed by the Georgia UDC and a number of Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV) Camps because of concern that interpretation of the site by the National Park Service would emphasize the ill-treatment of Union prisoners-of-war by the Confederates and gloss over the equally tragic conditions experienced by Confederates held in Union prison pens at Point Lookout, Fort Delaware, Johnson's Island, etc.

To alleviate these concerns, the legislation, as signed into law by President Richard M. Nixon, provided that one of the new park's primary missions was to commemorate the sacrifice of prisoners-of-war in all wars.

In the years following establishment of Andersonville National Historic Site, complaints from UDC and UCV members, while abating, have continued. Despite efforts, as mandated by Congress, "to provide an understanding of the overall prisoner-of-war story of the Civil War," the Service's presence at Andersonville still engenders reactions among some visitors that our interpretation is tilted. The sale of MacKinley Kantor's prize-winning novel *Andersonville* at the visitor center has been questioned.

While Jimmy Carter was governor of Georgia, he secured an appropriation from the state legislature for a prisoner-of-war memorial. Dedicated in 1978, this handsome memorial has helped salve lingering wounds associated with the suffering and death that has been a common experience of prisoners-of-war throughout history.

Increasingly in the last 15 years, but particularly since Fred Sanchez joined the park staff as chief ranger, the park has established an excellent rapport with organizations representing U.S. veterans and civilians held as prisoners-of-war in our century—the American Ex-Prisoners of War and the American Defenders of Bataan and Corregidor. A small museum has been developed to interpret the sacrifices and experiences of prisoners-of-war; ex-prisoners serve as VIPs; a monument has been erected by the survivors of Stalag 17B to all those held in German military prisons during World War II; the "Sack of Cement Cross" from Camp O'Donnell has been accessioned; former POWs take the lead in the annual Memorial Day commemoration held in the National Cemetery; and Cemetery Director Amande Rhodes has institutionalized an oral history program that is preserving for posterity the recollections of the tragic years as POWs that those veterans of man's inhumanity to man so vividly recall.

Insofar as onsite commemoration of World War II battles, campaigns, and activities, more than a generation passed before parks associated with my war were established. During the years between 1978 and 1992, five World War II associated parks—War in the Pacific National Historical Park, American Memorial Park, USS Arizona Memorial, Manzanar National Historic Site, and Port Chicago National Memorial—became units of the National Park System or affiliated areas. Interpretation and exhibits at the World War II park sites would be plagued by essential differences in the character of the belligerents. Although American deaths in the Civil War military far exceeded the number of United States servicemen and women who lost their lives in World War II, theirs was a common nationality and heritage, and—except for the 200,000 African American soldiers and sailors and a limited number of Native Americans—Civil War soldiers were of a single race. In the Great Pacific War (1941-1945), this was not the case, and on both the home front and in combat the enemy was viewed with a hatred that only a difference in race and culture can fully explain.

Racial stereotypes and antagonisms among many Americans dating to 1941 and before became apparent to the History Division in regard to the Japanese Relocation Centers and the decision to study them, looking toward the recognition of one or more as National Historic Landmarks (NHLs). In 1985, Secretary of the Interior Donald P. Hodel designated Manzanar as an NHL, and, in 1993, Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt afforded the same honor to the cemetery at Rohwer Relocation Center. As a follow-up on the Manzanar designation, Congress in 1992 established that area as a national historic site.

These actions sparked controversy. Lewis Hess, an irate Californian, wrote Associate Director for Cultural Resources Jerry L. Rogers:

> *It is obvious that you were not around Los Angeles in early 1942. If you will take the trouble to check, you will find… how Japanese military officers were arrested while posing as gardeners, etc., to gain military knowledge of the area.*
>
> *Relatives who have lived in the San Pedro area… say that on Dec. 7th, 1941, it was discovered that whole battalions of Japanese in uniforms were all ready for combat in case the planes continued on from Pearl Harbor, hidden in fishing boats in the harbor of San Pedro.*
>
> *All these things could* ***not*** *have been accomplished were it not for the cooperation of the Japanese "Americans" living here in California.*
>
> *Who knows what would have happened had not these so-called "loyal" citizens been detained in Manzanar….*

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